



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Epistemic Ideal of Reason-Giving in Deliberative Democracy

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Chambers, Simone. "The Epistemic Ideal of Reason-Giving in Deliberative Democracy."  
*Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6, no. 10 (2017): 59-64.

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As interest in deliberative democracy continues to grow, the term is becoming more umbrella-like encompassing different strands, orientations, and methodological proclivities. Helen Landemore in her essay “Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy” traces one such strand. This strand has been influenced by John Rawls and begins from the fact of pluralism. Navigating deep disagreements in a way that recognizes each person’s freedom and equality becomes the prime motivation in developing theories of deliberative democracy.

This in turn has led some to embrace a Rawlsian epistemological position of agnosticism with respect to the truth-value of moral and political claims. Epistemic abstinence then characterizes this strand of deliberative democracy. I have no quarrel with Landemore’s description and criticism of epistemic abstinence. I have a quarrel with her claim that epistemic abstinence describes “most deliberative democrats” and such abstinence is part of the “mainstream version deliberative democracy.”<sup>1</sup> In my essay I would like to trace a different strand of deliberative democracy one influenced by Jürgen Habermas’s work and which has in many ways been much more influential than Rawls.

### **The Heft of Deliberation**

In this alternative origin story, deliberative democracy grows as a response to and criticism of two interconnected strands of democratic theory that had come to dominate certainly the empirical study of democracy but also many basic theories of democracy. The first strand sees democracy as about the fair competition between fixed interests. Here voting is the central mechanism through which competing interests are mediated in a fair way that recognizes the equality of all citizens.

Deliberative democrats found this picture deeply inadequate on the twin grounds that it rested on an impoverished and indeed implausible view of legitimacy and two it presupposed a black box of fixed interests. Deliberative democracy shifts the focus from preference aggregation to the processes of opinion formation that precedes the vote. Aggregation often in the form of voting (and sometimes governed by majority rule) does not necessarily disappear. Whether we are talking about a citizen’s assembly, an informal public debate, a jury, everyday talk about a public issue, or a process of participatory budgeting, decision procedures are required in order to have an outcome.

But the question that motivated many deliberative democrats was how deliberation could carry the burden of democratic legitimacy in a way that aggregation could not).<sup>2</sup> For many theorists inspired by this alternative vision of democracy, Habermas offered a rich source of

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<sup>1</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, a central exemplar for Landemore, are indeed very mainstream and do follow Rawls in some form of abstinence. But I would not call Jeremy Waldron, a second example appealed to by Landemore, a deliberative democrat at all precisely because he objects to some epistemic assumptions of most deliberative democracy theory and also because he has more faith in majority voting than deliberation.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernard Manin (1987) for an early articulation of this view. But the contrast with aggregative pictures of democracy can be found in almost all the “narratives” of deliberative democracy. (Bohman 19989; Chambers 2003; Elstub and McLaverty 2014).

helpful theoretic insights to develop this talk centered view of democracy. Theorists drew primarily from two sources. First from his work on the public sphere which suggested that the essential relationship between the public and the state should be understood in terms of rational justification and discursive accountability. And second his work in communicative action and discourse ethics that offered a procedural ideal for the conditions of justification.

Landemore suggests that until recently this endorsement of deliberative democracy did not rely on an epistemic claim about outcomes but rather on a procedural claim about equality, respect and freedom of participants. Because deliberation (ideally anyway) requires that participants take on attitudes of respect and open mindedness towards each other's claims and grievances it is seen as a more satisfying instantiation of equal citizenship than one person one vote. This argument according to Landemore has dominated deliberative democracy (I agree) and it has no epistemic dimension (I disagree).

Here I come to the second strand in democratic theory and research against which deliberative democracy grew. That is the elitist view of democracy that is deeply suspect of ordinary citizen's competency. Deliberative democracy has for the most part been a champion of the epistemic competency of citizens if given the chance to deliberate with each other under positive conditions. Even deliberative democrats who focus on middle democracy rather than mass democracy claim the deliberation is valued because it enhances epistemic competency of the participants. This epistemic competency is often discussed under the ubiquitous phrase (i.e. every deliberative democrat uses this formation almost without exception) reason-giving. Before I elaborate the epistemic import of reason-giving I want to take a small detour into epistemic democracy and what it has come to mean in contemporary debates.

### **What Is Epistemic Democracy?**

Epistemic democracy is the view that democracy is to be valued not simply for normative reasons but also (or sometimes exclusively) because it arrives at or can arrive at the right answers. Some (but not all) theories of epistemic democracy are also theories of deliberative democracy because they identify deliberation as the mechanism through which right outcomes are produced (Estlund 2008; Landemore 2013; Mizak 2008). Are all theories of deliberative democracy also theories of epistemic democracy? I want to say that almost all theories of deliberative democracy recognize and value an epistemic function of deliberation but not all of them have focused on developing a clear procedurally-independent standard of correct outcome.

If, as Landemore appears to imply, such a procedurally-independent standard is the defining feature of an *epistemic theory of democracy* then perhaps it is true that David Estlund has really inaugurated a new era of deliberative theory. But if, as I would like to argue, deliberative democracy has always had a robust procedurally-dependent epistemological view of deliberation then deliberative democracy has always been a form of epistemic democracy or if one insists that that term must be reserved for theories that have procedurally-independent

standards of right outcomes, then I would say that deliberative democracy has always valued democracy on epistemic as well as normative grounds.

The sine qua non of deliberation is reason-giving. Now Landemore suggest that in early deliberative democracy reason-giving was tied to treating co-citizens with respect. We each deserve justification for coercion or claims we make on each other. But there was always more to reason-giving than equal respect. Certainly its agonist and postmodern critics have always thought of deliberative democracy as containing over blown claims to rationality and reason. But what is the epistemic status of the ubiquitous reason-giving?

Landemore suggests that there are two minimum requirements in order to be able to talk about epistemic democracy. The first is to accept that political and normative questions are open to rational adjudication. She does not insist on a very high bar here. Accepting that there are “better or worse answers to at least some political questions” (290) is enough. The second is to accept that democratic procedures are a good way to generate that adjudication.

Both of these dimensions are explicitly present in Habermas’s work and both are explicitly or implicitly present in deliberative democracy theories that have been influenced by Habermas ideal of discourse. But, as I argue below, these dimensions can be present without a procedurally-independent standard of correct outcome. How do we know if the answers are better or worse? For public disputes that are predominantly normative, the Habermasian answer is to look to see to what extent the conditions of justification have been met in democratic procedures.

### **Its Roots in Habermas**

People often note that Habermas’s discourse theory insists on a strong analogy between truth claims and normative claims of rightness. When reading Habermas as containing strong epistemic claims (as Landemore does) it is sometimes common to mistake analogy with identity. Landemore for example says that the distinction between truth and rightness is “purely semantic.” (285). But this is not entirely correct. In respect to truth Habermas makes a distinction between what the truth is (say correspondence) and how we arrive at the truth (discourse). No such distinction is possible with regard to normative questions. Therefore for Habermas there are procedurally-independent standards of truth but no procedurally-independent standards of rightness even though both truth and rightness are ‘established’ through discourse and as such open to rational adjudication. Decisions facing a democratic polity will contain both elements.

The more a policy dispute centers on facts or established knowledge, the more it is truth apt. Thus when Habermas talks about democracy’s truth-tracking potential he has procedurally-independent standards in mind which is why he appeals to empirical evidence to assess whether citizens have basic knowledge, are likely to get the science right, or make basic errors in judgements (2006 414). But here too Rawls is not agnostic nor does he advocate abstinence. Rawls suggests that public reason rely on established truth of science and common sense for example (2005 223-227). Rawls’s abstinence enters when we turn to deep

moral and normative questions. Here Rawls insists that, on the one hand, participants in debate exercise self-restraint and refrain from claiming truth or objective status for their normative positions and, on the other hand, no strong truth claim should be made regarding the outcomes of public justification.

Habermas makes neither of these claims. Citizens can bring up any and all claims certainly in the broad public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Habermas thinks that properly structured democracies will be able to claim a rational status, fallible and corrigible to be sure, for outcomes. But the epistemic claim tied to normative rightness is a procedural not a procedurally-independent claim. Now Landemore might say that any claim that outcomes are better is a procedurally-independent standard even if the assessment is exclusively tied to whether the procedures are good. Outcomes are not procedures; to value outcomes is to value something more than mere procedure.

But if this is what she means then she is operating with a very narrow view of procedural theory in which democracy is valued for entirely outcome-independent reasons. On this reading of proceduralism then democracy might very well fair poorly on all epistemic measures but that is not why one endorses democracy; one endorses it because it treats people equally not because it arrives at better outcomes. But ‘procedurally-independent standard of correct outcome’ implies that there is a standard that is independent of the procedure not just that we value outcome and not just procedure. It is this idea of independent standard that Habermas has explicitly questioned in his procedural theory of democracy and which as a result was never been a focus of the epistemic claims inherent in deliberative democracy from the beginning.

There are two reasons why Habermas’s strong epistemic claims about discourse are procedural claims. The first is that Habermas’s epistemology is parasitic on his linguistic theory that reconstructs the conditions of justification. Rational outcomes are the outcomes that would be justified in a discourse of all those affected. But no thought experiment can produce this outcome independently. So we are thrown back on trying to approximate the procedural conditions of justification: “The unity of a completely proceduralized reason then retreats into the discursive structure of public communication” (1996, 186). But there is a second and I think more interesting reason why procedures and not outcomes are the focus of epistemic assessment.

Habermas is fully committed to the idea that democracy if properly structured results in better, more epistemically sound, and more rational outcomes than other regime types. But he often sees epistemic gains in the long term using the language of “learning” for example. Whereas Rawls thought we should exercise self-restraint for the sake of getting along under conditions of pluralism, Habermas sees unrestrained pluralism under democratic rules as the

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<sup>3</sup> While it is true that Habermas insists that religious claims should be excluded from debates in Parliament, this is not a form epistemic abstinence. On the contrary, religious claims are excluded because Habermas wants to make a strong epistemic claim about the discursive process and such a claims would be undermined, he thinks, if religious claims were allowed to enter the debate (Habermas 2008).

condition for epistemic advancement. The wild and anarchic nature of the informal public sphere allows for new claims to emerge, hidden injustices to be unmasked, received truth to be questioned, and new forms of political participation to be tested. This lack of Rawlsian restraint plays an important discursive and epistemic function by holding out the possibility of learning, revision, correction, and change through criticism of and opposition to stands taken and claims made especially by those who rule. This is a Kantian/pragmatist view of the way reason works: epistemic gains come through public criticism and demands for rational justification.

### **A Tradition of Reason**

Few deliberative democrats have adopted the full Habermasian discourse theoretic edifice of his political theory. But many have embraced the Habermasian intuition that giving each other reasons, listening to each other's claims, and being committed to collective problem solving, leads to improved epistemic competence and better outcomes. Not just better in the sense that the outcomes are more legitimate but also better because outcomes are more in line with reason.

Here we see the Kantian idea that reason arrives at the right answers through criticism, argument and persuasion. In a very famous passage from *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant says: "Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the freedom of critique through any prohibition...The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even veto, without holding back" (Kant 1998, p. 643 [A738/B767]).

This view is echoed in Mill as well as Dewey and has been, I would argue, a central aspirational ideal of deliberative democracy from its inception. But it is an ideal that resides in the process of reason-giving and in maintaining the procedural conditions conducive to that reason-giving. Thus the evaluation of the epistemic value of the outcome will be invested in how well the procedures approximate good procedures.

I have tried to make two arguments. The first is that because reason-giving has been at the center of deliberative democracy from the start and because many theorists of deliberative democracy have been influenced by Habermas in thinking about how reason-giving works, there has always been an epistemic dimension to deliberative democracy. The second argument I have made is that criterion of procedurally-independent standard of correct outcome is not the best way to conceptualize that epistemic dimension of much of deliberative democracy because so much of that dimension is invested in good procedures.

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